

THE ART & CRAFT OF SONGWRITING

by BL Shirelle

LETTER FROM BL

You're here because you've got something inside you that refuses to stay quiet. A lot of people never find their voice. Some had one, but it got buried under the world. This course is not about being perfect. It's about being honest, clear, and powerful with what you already carry. I'm not here to teach you how to sound good. I'm here to help you say something true. A songwriter is someone who turns a feeling into a world and invites other people into it. I started writing music (professionally) in a prison cell with nothing but the truth and something to say. I began my career on my top bunk in my tenth year of incarceration. From there, I sold my first two professional placements. That journey has led me to being Co-Director of FREER Records. The first nonprofit record label for prison-impacted musicians in America. The beauty of songwriting is anybody can do it – but the brave take it farther. They tell the truth even when it hurts. They tell the story even when they don't look perfect in it. They create room for someone else to heal.

We're going to work in layers:

- Heartline (the emotional mission)
- Scene vs Tell (showing vs explaining)
- 3rd Person Confession (distance = freedom)
- Hooks Across Genres (rap, R&B, country, etc.)
- Switching Genres (rewriting your own song)

You don't need a beat to start.

You need a feeling and a pen.

I respect you for being here.

Let's get to work.

– BL

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HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

1. **Write honestly**

This is not evidence. This is art.

Don't worry about the version of you the world judges. Write the version that's real.

2. **Do the exercises fully**

Half-answers = half-songs.

Fill the page.

3. **Keep everything**

A bad line might be a great hook later.

4. **Genre doesn't matter at first**

Emotion first. Format second.

5. **Answer like nobody will read it**

That's where the truth lives.

Every module has:

- **Concept**
 - **Real examples**
 - **One full-page exercise**
 - **Inter-lesson insight** (quick tool)
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MODULE 1 — The Heartline

What am I really trying to say?

Every great song has **one truth at its center** — the **heartline**.

It's the **emotional mission** of the song.

This is NOT the topic — it's the **real reason** you're talking about the topic.

Topic:

"My daughter"

Heartline:

"I regret the years I lost before I learned how to love her right."

Topic:

"Prison"

Heartline:

"I thought punishment would change me — but love did."

Topic:

"Addiction"

Heartline:

"I didn't know recovery meant forgiving myself."

When your heartline is clear, everything in the song serves it:

- verses get deeper
- hooks get sharper
- details hit harder

A **confused heartline** = empty bars.

A **clean heartline** = unforgettable song.

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Heartline Example — Light

Truth:

“I miss my grandmother.”

Heartline tones:

- **Angry:** I got robbed of more time.
 - **Sad:** I still hear her voice in empty rooms.
 - **Hopeful:** I carry what she taught me.
 - **Numb:** Holidays feel fake now.
 - **Grateful:** Her love raised me twice.
 - **Confused:** Why do I miss someone I couldn't understand?
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Heartline Example — Deep (REGRET)

Truth:

“I hurt someone who trusted me.”

Rewrite that truth in 6 tones:

- **Angry:** Time stole my chance to tell the truth.
- **Sad:** I replay the night like I'm trying to change the ending.
- **Hopeful:** Maybe wisdom is the apology life makes too late.
- **Numb:** I talk to the wall like it can send messages backwards.
- **Grateful:** Pain introduced me to who I really am.

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- **Confused:** Why did the wound teach me more than the love did?

One truth = **six emotional versions.**

That's songwriting.

EXERCISE 1 — The Heartline (FULL PAGE)

This song is really about:

Write it six ways

Angry:

Sad:

Hopeful:

Numb:

Grateful:

Confused:

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Reflection:

Which truth feels like it **hurts to admit**?

Write why:

INTER-LESSON — Your Story vs Their Story

When you write, you're not writing what **happened** — you're writing **what it meant**.

Two types of truth:

- **Story truth:** the facts
- **Heart truth:** the meaning

Songwriting is **heart truth**.

People don't cry because they know the date it happened.

They cry because they recognize the **feeling**.

Write feelings.

Not reports.

MODULE 2 — Scene vs Tell

Show me. Don't explain it.

"Telling" is explaining the feeling.

"Showing" is **making me see it myself**.

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Tell:

“I was scared.”

Scene:

“The door slammed, and I froze like the air turned into glass.”

Scenes make the listener **experience** the moment.

Examples

Tell:

“I regret hurting him.”

Scene:

“I still hear him breathing heavy, waiting for me to lie softer.”

Tell:

“I fell in love.”

Scene:

“She laughed, and the sound felt like someone unlocked a window inside me.”

Tell:

“I miss my son.”

Scene:

“I still make two plates like he might walk in the door.”

Rule of thumb

If I can **see it**, **hear it**, or **touch it**, it's a **scene**.

If you're **explaining**, it's **telling**.

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EXERCISE 2 — Scene vs Tell (FULL PAGE)

Pick one heartbreak truth from Exercise 1.

Rewrite it:

- as a TELL sentence
- as a SCENE

Tell:

Scene:

Now expand the scene into 6 lines:

Reflection:

Which version hits harder when you read it back out loud?

Why?

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INTER-LESSON — Writing Through Noise

Some of your best lines will come from the moments you **don't want to write**.

Noise = survival mode:

- court dates
- drama
- depression
- custody calls
- beef
- numbness

Noise makes you think:

“I don't have anything deep to say.”

But truth lives **under** the noise.

Write **right through it**:

“Today I don't feel anything — write that.”

That becomes:

“Feeling nothing scares me.”

And that becomes a **song**.

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MODULE 3 — The 3rd Person Confession

Distance creates truth.

Writing “I hurt him” can feel like a **confession**.

Writing “She hurt him” turns it into a **story** —
and that distance frees the **real honesty**.

3rd person lets you:

- tell the truth without **defending yourself**
- show your darkest moment like **you’re watching it**
- remove **shame filters**
- be **brutally real**

1st Person:

“I hit rock bottom.”

3rd Person:

“She smoked to forget the child she lost.”

Who is “she”?

It’s still **you**.

Deep Example — Regret in 3rd Person

Truth: “I betrayed someone.”

1st Person:

“I betrayed him after he trusted me.”

3rd Person:

“She watched his face fall like the world got smaller.

She wanted to take the lie back before it was finished leaving her mouth.

But the truth came too late — like the apology after the funeral.”

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3rd person = **cinematic truth**.

EXERCISE 3 — 3rd Person Confession (FULL PAGE)

Take your **raw heartline** and rewrite it in **3rd person**:

“She...” / “He...” / “They...”

Write **8 lines**:

Reflection:

How does it feel different from “I”?

INTER-LESSON — Your Song Is Not Evidence

Songwriting is **not a court statement**.

It's **emotional truth**, not **legal truth**.

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You're allowed to:

- exaggerate
- simplify
- focus on the moment instead of the timeline
- write the **feeling**, not the facts

Your story belongs to **your heart**, not a file.

MODULE 4 — Hooks Across Genres

One truth — different musical worlds.

A **hook** is the emotional center wrapped in melody or rhythm.

It's the **moment everyone remembers** — even if they forget every verse.

Hooks are **genre-flexible**:

- The **truth stays the same**
- The **delivery changes**

Same feeling → different clothes.

To understand hooks across genres, we take **one emotional truth** and **translate** it into different styles.

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The Core Truth

“I regret what I lost.”

We'll turn it into:

- Rap
- R&B
- Country

This shows **technical differences**, not emotional differences.

Rap Hook

Rhythm/delivery first. Image second. Melody optional.

Short. Punchy.

Built for **bounce, repetition, quotability.**

Example:

“**Buried my heart in the city I left,
Regret got me breathing in debt...**”

Why it works:

- **Internal rhyme** (heart/city, regret/debt)
- **Hard consonants**
- **Compression** (big feeling, small space)

Rap hooks **hit.**

They **land.**

They're **tattoos**, not paragraphs.

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R&B Hook

Melody first. Emotion forward. Rhythm follows the feeling.

Example:

**“If I could love you at the time you needed,
Maybe the sky wouldn’t fall so easy...”**

Why it works:

- **Melisma potential** (notes can stretch)
- **Open vowels** (love/needed/easy)
- **Heartline sung** (not compressed)

R&B hooks **bloom**.

They take **more air**.

They **live in the voice**.

Country Hook

Story first. Scene second. Simplicity is power.

Example:

**“I left her standing by the porch light burning slow,
Sometimes the truth arrives too late to show.”**

Why it works:

- **Cinematic detail** (porch light)
- **Simple language** (no metaphors stacked)

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- **Plain truth** (no hiding)

Country hooks use **visual honesty** — you **see** it.

What to learn

Rap = punchline truth

Hard rhythm, internal rhyme.

R&B = sung truth

Open vowels, melodic emotionality.

Country = plain truth

Cinematic detail, simple language.

Same feeling.

Different instrument.

You're not writing **different stories**, you're writing **different techniques**.

EXERCISE 4 — Hook in 3 Styles (FULL PAGE)

Pick **your heartline** from Exercise 1.

Example format:

Truth:

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Write it as:

Rap Hook (4 bars):

R&B Hook (4 lines or melody idea):

Country Hook (4 lines scene-based):

Reflection

Which one feels **most natural** to you?

Which one feels **hardest** — and **what does that teach you** about your technique?

INTER-LESSON — Rewrite Without Mercy

Good songwriting is **editing**.

A lot of people write one line and fall in love with it.

Don't fall in love.

Fall in **craft**.

Rewrite everything if necessary:

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- cut extra words
- sharpen images
- remove clichés
- replace abstract feelings with **scenes**
- make the **truth tighter**

Example:

Soft: “I miss her smile.”

Sharp: “The house is loud but the room she lived in stays quiet.”

The second one **hurts**.

That’s the goal.

Rewrite like the song **has to survive on the truth alone**.

MODULE 5 — Genre Switch (Verse Challenge)

Turn your own song into another genre.

This is where you **prove** the heartline holds.

A good song isn’t **locked** to the style it was born in.

If your verse **can’t move**, the heartline wasn’t strong — the **genre was holding it up**.

We start **in one genre** and **translate** the verse to another.

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Truth Example

“I destroyed something good because I was scared of needing it.”

Rap Verse

(4 bars, compact, rhythmic)

“Heart like a ghost in the mirror when I face me,
Broke the only bridge that could take me,
Fear wrote the script that replaced me,
Now I learn love from the pain that remakes me.”

Notice:

- internal rhymes (face me/take me)
 - **compressed** lines
 - heavy beats
-

Country Verse

(same truth, scene-based)

“She slammed the screen door on a summer with no breeze,
I let pride choke the truth like a stubborn, dying tree,
Now I sit and watch the porch light burning through the leaves,
If love comes back around, it only comes for those who bleed.”

Notice:

- **full scene**
- porch light

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- summer
- tree
- concrete images

Same truth → **different technique.**

R&B Verse

(same truth, melodic space)

**“I pushed you away just to feel in control,
I held onto fear like it kept me whole,
I learned how to love from the wounds you let go,
Now I’m growing in places I used to stay cold.”**

Notice:

- vowels open for melody
 - rhythm follows emotion
 - **sings**, doesn't punch
-

Why this matters

Once you can **switch genres**:

- you're not stuck
- your truth becomes **bigger than the beat**

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- you can write for **multiple artists**
- you understand **format vs feeling**

This is **technical songwriting** —
not just expressions.

EXERCISE 5 — Genre Switch (FULL PAGE)

Take **one verse** you wrote from **any style**.

Rewrite it:

Original Verse (your style):

Translated Verse (new genre):

Reflection:

What changed — the **truth** or the **delivery**?

What did you **learn about your natural voice**?

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INTER-LESSON — Protect Your Work

Your voice is **valuable**.

Protect it:

- save your pages
- date everything
- keep drafts
- don't delete "bad" lines
- write with freedom, edit with precision

Your ideas are **currency**.

FINAL PAGE — Closing Words

If you made it here, you already did something most people never do:
You faced yourself honestly on the page.

That's bravery.

Songwriting is not about **being perfect**.
It's about being **imperfect in a beautiful way** —
with **craft, truth, and voice**.

Keep writing:

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- when you feel nothing
- when you feel too much
- when the truth is embarrassing
- when the truth is victory
- when the world is loud
- when your mind is louder

You are an artist now.

Not because someone said it —
but because **you wrote**.

Much love. Head up ALWAYS.

— **BL**

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